

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Massachusetts -- Recruiting Direct Service Professionals/Personal Assistants in a Competitive Environment

Issue: Cooperative Recruitment Efforts for Direct Support Professionals

Summary

The Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR) and independent provider agencies joined forces to recruit direct support professionals for people with developmental disabilities. DMR and the agencies hired a communications company to develop a collaborative recruitment effort among agencies. A pilot program in the Boston metropolitan area identified 2,000 potential workers in its first eighteen months of operation, and agencies hired more than 200 of these people. In 2003 the program's Web site was expanded so older people and individuals with disabilities can use it to directly hire workers, and to accommodate other states that are planning similar marketing initiatives.

Introduction

As more people with disabilities live independently or with support in the community, the demand for direct support professionals, supervisors, and managers is increasing. Meanwhile the number of appropriately skilled people applying for positions has decreased in recent years. Massachusetts, like many states, will continue to face a shortage of available workers due to significant demographic changes and other factors.

The number of people applying for direct support positions is decreasing.

This report briefly describes a recruitment effort started by the Metro Region of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation (DMR), which includes Boston. DMR and provider agencies, in collaboration with a communications company, conducted a marketing campaign to recruit direct support professionals. After a successful pilot phase, the recruitment initiative expanded to include the rest of Massachusetts.

In 2003 the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Center for Health Policy and Research, and Rewarding Work Resources, Inc., a new non-profit organization that grew from this initiative, obtained a grant from New England

States Consortium Systems Organization to expand the program. They changed the Web site to also enable older people and people with disabilities to identify direct support workers.

This report was originally written by a former regional director of DMR and is based in part on his experiences working on the initiative.

Background

From the start, DMR had two overarching goals for the recruitment campaign. First and foremost was to recruit direct support professionals. Second, and over the longer term, DMR wanted to increase public awareness of the successful integration of people with developmental disabilities into their communities, and of direct service professionals' positive contributions. DMR sought to create a greater understanding, both in the general community and among the staff themselves, that direct support is a valued profession. DMR believed greater understanding of these messages would make future recruiting efforts easier.

Intervention

In 1999, DMR convened a meeting with provider agencies that served people with developmental disabilities, asking them if they would like to jointly develop new approaches to recruiting direct support professionals. DMR supported the effort with professional staff assistance and

funding. Each participating provider agency contributed additional funding. The initiative was meant to augment existing recruitment efforts. In order to assess the current situation, provider agencies completed a survey to identify what had worked and not worked in the past. This generated valuable benchmark information that helped shape the subsequent campaign. As importantly, it gave the agencies a chance to learn from each other.

The communications company conducted extensive interviews with direct support professionals who had remained in the field. It was critical to understand what motivated direct support professionals to stay with their work, since the agencies wanted to attract more of these people.

A consistent story emerged. People who continued to work as direct support professionals had discovered something very important: this

The campaign's theme -- "Some people are lucky enough to love their work".

was work where they could make a difference and where their efforts were deeply and sincerely appreciated by people with disabilities, families, supervisors, and co-

workers. For many, it was the first work situation in which they felt genuinely appreciated. The campaign's name—*Rewarding Work*—and theme—*Some people are lucky enough to love their work*—emerged directly from this research.

After this initial research involving the agencies and direct support professionals, DMR and the agencies developed an initial recruitment plan. To focus attention on the effort, the recruitment campaign was officially launched with a kick-off event at the State House. Television, radio, and newspaper coverage helped publicize the event.

In the following months, providers sent informational brochures and posters to libraries, job centers, churches, senior centers, and other distribution points. DMR and the agencies initiated direct mail campaigns, gave radio interviews, and developed news stories profiling direct support professionals that appeared in local newspapers. Advertisements were placed in regional and local newspapers and in selected college newspapers.

Finally, and most importantly, a Web site (www.rewardingwork.org) was created to support the campaign. This site became especially important as the initiative progressed. The Web site efficiently reaches prospective workers and provides a way for people to learn about the need for staff. In addition, a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, toll-free number (888-444-1616) tracks all calls.

In 2003, the initiative was expanded to allow older people and people with disabilities the opportunity to find staff directly through the Web site or by calling the toll-free number. The job application on the Web site asks several questions that help individual employers search the database of workers and find people who meet certain criteria such as language spoken, geographic area, willingness to drive or to work certain hours, and experience.

The initiative has expanded beyond Massachusetts to two other states that are planning recruitment initiatives: Connecticut and New Jersey. Although both states paid a licensing fee to use the Web site and will pay for use of the toll-free number, concurrent campaigns to raise awareness are expected to be the most significant expenditures.

Implementation

Several elements of the recruitment campaign contributed to its success. Key factors were: the cooperation among provider agencies; letting employers (agencies and now also individuals) control the initiative; follow-up with job applicants; tracking results; and using professional marketing assistance.

Employer cooperation is necessary. Employers share ideas and tips to help each other. They frequently referred a prospective worker to other agencies if the fit was not right for them, knowing that the favor would be returned. Discussions with people with disabilities helped design the expansion of the Web site, and continuing feedback from all participants assists in designing improvements.

Autonomy is critical. From the beginning, DMR said it would support the effort, but that it was up to the providers and individual employers to

share and direct the campaign. Provider representatives indicated the campaign's value by continuing to devote time to it.

Follow-up is essential. People who call in response to ads or other promotions need a quick response. It is up to employers, whether agencies or individuals, to screen, interview, and hire prospects.

Tracking results is key. Rewarding Work Resources, Inc. has carefully monitored responses from all of its outreach efforts. This tracking enables program participants to make informed judgments about next steps as they go along, and provides an ongoing benchmark against which to evaluate success.

Professional assistance is vital. Expert marketing assistance increased the campaign's effectiveness. Importantly, Rewarding Work Resources combined expertise in planning and executing marketing campaigns with an

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understanding of the aspirations of people with disabilities, and the provider agencies' and DMR's needs.

Impact

During its first full year, the recruitment campaign generated about 2,000 inquiries from people interested in working with adults with developmental disabilities. Approximately 200 of these people were hired in the first eighteen months. Since its 1999 beginning, the program has received nearly 20,000 inquiries from candidates. The cost, including DMR and provider contributions, for the first year was \$100,000, including initial start-up costs that were not necessary in subsequent years.

Contact Information

For more information about this initiative to recruit direct support professionals, please e-mail Jeff Keilson at JAKeilson@aol.com. More information about the initiative can be found online at www.rewardingwork.org.

Some Discussion Questions:

Can this program help address national recruitment concerns while providing local solutions?

Are there other agencies/positions that could benefit from a recruitment effort like this?

The original report was written by Jeff Keilson, a former DMR Regional Director and now an independent consultant. Medstat revised this report, which is one of a series of reports by Medstat for the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) highlighting promising practices in home and community-based services. The entire series is available online at CMS' Web site, <http://www.cms.hhs.gov/promisingpractices>. This report is intended to share information about different approaches to offering home and community-based services. This report is not an endorsement of any practice.